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Contra Raids Reported Trailing Off

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Feb. 20 — Diplomats and military analysts here said in interviews this week that rebel activity has declined sharply in recent months and that the Sandinista Government is in its strongest military position since it took power six and a half years ago.

The large majority of the rebel force is believed to have retreated to bases in Honduras. As the Sandinista Army has become more effective, the diplomats and analysts said, the rebels have been crippled by problems of supply, training and logistics.

The most graphic demonstration of the weakening of the rebel forces, diplomats said, was their inability to disrupt the vital coffee harvest, which recently ended. Pickers were able to work in areas that were considered too dangerous last year, and Comdr. Manuel Salvatierra, the senior military officer in the coffee-growing province of Matagalpa, said Tuesday that the harvest was completed without a single casualty.

Leaders of the rebels, who are known as contras, have said they need help to step up their fight against the Sandinistas. President Reagan said this week that he will ask Congress to approve a proposal to send them \$100 million in covert assistance, including \$70 million in military aid.

'The Vote Is Definitely Critical'

"The vote is definitely critical," said Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, the principal rebel leader, in a telephone interview from Washington today. He said Soviet-made MI-24 helicopters used by the Sandinistas were proving to be potent weapons, and he said antiaircraft guns were among the contras' most immediate needs.

"Compared to last year, yes, there is less activity," Mr. Calero said. "But that does not mean we feel any weaker or any less optimistic."

According to diplomats and foreign military officers, the Sandinista Government has received a steady supply of weapons, has come to dominate the air and has developed many experienced squad and platoon leaders in the last year.

But rebel commanders were said to have failed to build a disciplined fighting force, partly because they lack foreign trainers like those used by the Sandinista Army. They were also said to have been unable to provide even such essentials as boots and ponchos for their guerrilla fighters.

Affects on Aid Vote

Congressional aides and other officials in Washington said they were uncertain how the contras' troubles would affect coming votes on Administration proposals to give military aid to the rebel force.

"Some members figure that if the contras are being wiped out, there's no use wasting any more money on them," said one aide in a telephone interview. "But others are saying that now is the time when an infusion of cash can do the most good."

"If they can get some heavier weapons, including a few aircraft to challenge the Sandinistas in the sky, and if they get American military advisers who can train their noncommissioned

officers, the situation would change," said one officer.

Diplomats with access to Western intelligence reports said they believe only one contra task force of about 3,000 men remained inside Nicaragua. It is fighting in the south-central part of the country.

The diplomats said they believed more than 10,000 rebel guerrillas were camped inside Honduras. The estimates confirm reports from Honduras.

A Latin American military specialist said he believed that an injection of military aid for the rebels, particularly if it included helicopters that could challenge Sandinista air superiority, might improve their position. He also said they would greatly profit from American advisers "who could teach them how to launch an attack instead of just running wild."

"But even with that help, the contras need to resolve some serious internal problems," the specialist said. "Theirs is a force without unity of command. Everyone orders, no one obeys."